



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Leibniz-Stahl Controversy

Citation for published version:

Phemister, P 2018, 'Leibniz-Stahl Controversy', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 6, pp. 1238-1241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2018.1477735>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/09608788.2018.1477735](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2018.1477735)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

British Journal for the History of Philosophy

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in British Journal for the History of Philosophy on 24/7/2018, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09608788.2018.1477735>.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



The Leibniz-Stahl Controversy, translated, edited, and with an introduction by François Duchesneau and Justin E. H. Smith, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2016, pp. lxxxix + 443, \$125.00 (hb), ISBN: 978-0-300-16114-4.

The Leibniz-Stahl Controversy is the latest addition to the Yale Leibniz Series and is welcomed by historians of philosophy, of science, and of medicine. It holds especial interest for those who specialize on the work of Leibniz and of Stahl, who is an interesting figure in his own right, having influenced among others, the English eighteenth century chemist, Joseph Priestley and French nineteenth century philosopher, Félix Ravaisson.¹ Research on Leibniz's contributions to the life sciences has flourished in the last few decades, due in no small part to the editors of this volume, François Duchesneau and Justin E. H. Smith. Their pioneering work has brought to the foreground Leibniz's thoughts on living organisms and the physiological workings of human and other bodies and has proved inspirational to the next generation of Leibniz scholars. It is into this energetic intellectual context that the *Leibniz –Stahl Controversy* makes its timely appearance. The volume arises directly out of the editors' respective and respected investigations of topics central to the controversy (e.g. François Duchesneau, *Les Modèles du Vivant de Descartes et Leibniz* (Paris, 1998), *Leibniz: Le vivant et l'organisme* (Paris, 2010); Justin E. H. Smith, *Divine Machines: Leibniz and the Sciences of Life*, Princeton, 2011)). Their studies highlighted not only the importance of medicine (iatrochemistry) to our understanding of early modern science and philosophy, but also the significance of Leibniz's exchanges with the chemist and professor of medicine at the University of Halle, Georg Ernst Stahl (1659-1734) and led to the decision to translate the controversy that Stahl had published in 1720.

¹ My thanks to Obie Hickmott, Mark Sinclair, Enrico Pasini and Rodolfo Garau for bringing this and other points of interest relating to Stahl to my attention.

Expertly executed by Duchesneau and Smith, the translation opens up to us the seventeenth century world of iatrochemistry. It helps us better to appreciate Leibniz's own appreciation of the need for empirical investigation of bodies, enhances our understanding of his approach to the study of medicine, and sheds light on his views on physiology and physiological processes such as nutrition, secretion and growth, on the nature and fluidity of organic bodies and their relation to the soul, on therapeutic practices, including the use of drugs, and his thoughts on mechanism and organism more generally. As with other volumes in the series, the edition presents the original text (in Latin) and the English translation on facing pages, together with full explanatory apparatus. It includes a lengthy and informative introduction in which the editors explain the position of medicine within early modern philosophy, detail the historical background, identify the key early modern figures, and provide a comprehensive and accessible overview of central points of agreement and contention between Leibniz and Stahl.

Stahl published his *Theoria medica vera* (*True Medical Theory*) in 1708. There, he defended an empiricist methodology that convinced him of the inherent corruptibility of organic bodies and the need for the 'contingent power of a noncorporeal entity that could produce and preserve the integrative structure and dynamics of the body' (xxvii). The book provoked Leibniz to compose his 'Animadversions concerning Certain Assertions of the *True Medical Theory*', which he arranged to be passed through an intermediary to Stahl with a request for his response. Leibniz's Animadversions and Stahl's reluctant response were followed in turn by further responses on both sides. Four years after Leibniz's death, Stahl published the entire exchange as *Negotium Otiosum seu Σκιαμαχία* (*A Futile Affair; or Shadowboxing*), here translated in full into English for the first time. That Stahl delayed publication of the controversy until after Leibniz's death is indicative of Stahl's rather condescending attitude towards Leibniz. Stahl was clearly irritated by the presumption implicit in Leibniz's

Animadversions or Doubts that he should better defend or even abandon his opinions, including those that served as 'grounding principles' (4-5). Stahl was further angered that, as he put it, 'a response was expected' (4-5) and begrudged having to compose 'a wordier plain recounting' of what he considered 'the simplest truths' (4-5).

The catalyst for Leibniz's *Animadversions*, Stahl's *Theoria medica vera*, is not, of course, included here, but the editors' lengthy introductory essay and excellent explanatory notes compensate fully and Stahl's own 'plain recounting' of his ideas ensures his views are adequately presented. Following Stahl's preface, the *Negotium Otiosum* opens with Leibniz's 'Animadversions Concerning Certain Assertions of the *True Medical Theory*' and proceeds through Stahl's first responses (the 'Enondations'), Stahl's 'Summary of the Principal Points of Doubt', Leibniz's second responses (the 'Exceptions') and Stahl's 'Replies' to the 'Exceptions'. This chronological ordering of the protagonists' remarks and responses allows the reader a clear overview of the controversy's development and makes it relatively easy to trace the development of specific issues within the debate.

Outlining one small, but significant, aspect of the debate may serve to give the reader a sense of the volume's range and capacity to enhance our understanding of the empirically minded Stahl and Leibniz, whose empiricism was tempered by rational inference. In Animadversion V, Leibniz defends insensible auditory perception against Stahl's claim on page 35 of the *True Medical Theory* that noise is sensed only when one's attention is directed towards it. Aligning visual and auditory experiences, Leibniz draws on the familiar example of sensing green. Green, he contends, can be consciously perceived only if its yellow and blue constituent parts are also perceived, albeit insensibly. Similarly, he continues, we can only perceive our own bodies as wholes if we also perceive its constituent parts: we must be perceiving the parts even though we cannot direct our attention towards, or be conscious of, them individually

(32-33). Responding at Enondation V (86-93), Stahl questions whether we can be truly be said to perceive the minute parts of bodies. After all, our insensible perceptions can provide no knowledge of the distinctive shapes and sizes of these parts that would allow us to distinguish one from another. How can we be said to perceive minute parts if our insensible perceptions do not allow us to perceive them distinctly enough to identify them as individual parts? Stahl's remarks are both subtle and astute. In his reply in Exception to Enondation V, Leibniz can only reiterate his claim that when we perceive green, we must also perceive its blue and yellow components, for 'unless each part of the aggregate affected the soul, it would not be affected by the whole', although because the parts are 'hidden in the sensation of the green color', they are 'not the least perceived by us except at concealed in the green' (268-269). Stahl affords himself the final word in his extended Reply to Exception V (268-273), the crux of which is captured in his distinction between the active power of the soul for sensing and not sensing, and its passive receptivity for motions affecting the sensory organics from outside' (270-271). His claim, in short, is that the body might well be affected by external stimuli, but unless the soul attends to these changes in its body, there can be no sensation or perception of them in the soul. It is left to us to reconstruct what might have been Leibniz's response.